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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet presents a series of tips for teachers to use in establishing classroom discipline. The first 11 tips provide guidance for the teacher in the use of language to maintain discipline: (1) be specific and clear; (2) be simple, brief, and to the point; (3) state directions positively; (4) use hard-line phrases selectively; (5) offer alternatives for unacceptable behavior; (6) replace threats with clear expectations and consequences; (7) eliminate questions you really don't mean to ask; (8) avoid labeling; (9) avoid ambivalent words; (10) replace authoritarian words; and (11) offer choices. Additional suggestions concerning limit setting and timing are also offered which include establishing routines, pointing out the sequence of activities, allowing time for transition from one activity to another, recognizing that it can be hard for children to stop an activity, and preparing children for new situations. (VW)

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SETTING LIMITS

Tips for Teachers of Young Children

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Project Enlightenment, located in Raleigh, North Carolina, is a comprehensive mental health/educational program serving young children (birth to age six), their parents, teachers, and other child care givers. Administered through the Wake County Public School System and affiliated with Area Mental Health for Wake County, the Project has received local, state, and national recognition for its innovative approaches to prevention and early intervention, its effective service delivery system, and its positive influence in the community. Selected as a state model for early intervention, Project Enlightenment has also been selected as one of seven national models of preschool mental health programs by the Joint Information Service of the National Association for Mental Health.

Major services of Project Enlightenment include consultation to day care and preschool teachers, parent education, family counseling, teacher training, a demonstration preschool, community consultation and education, services to high risk infants, a TALKline telephone consultation service, and a Parent-Teacher Resource Center. In existence since 1969, the Project includes a multi-disciplinary staff of early childhood educators, parent education workers, and psychologists. Interested persons are invited to visit or write for additional information.

FIRMNESS:
A Way to Help Young Children Learn to Behave

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Edited by McCutchen B. Anderson

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SETTING LIMITS

Tips for Teachers of Young Children

One of the essential skills in establishing discipline in a classroom setting is the ability to set effective limits. Learning to set effective limits does not come easily. Because we think that setting effective limits is a basic tool for all other discipline, we encourage you to learn each tip, step by step until you have gradually incorporated these ideas into your discipline style.

THE LANGUAGE OF LIMIT SETTING . . . LET YOUR WORDS WORK FOR YOU

1. BE SPECIFIC AND CLEAR

Rather than giving vague and generalized directions such as, "Behave yourself," or "Be a good girl." communicate specifically and clearly what your expectations are. The language which is used should describe the limit in behavioral and observable terms. This gives clear guidelines for behavior and makes it possible for both teacher and child to know when limits are followed or not followed:

EXAMPLES:

VAGUE AND GENERAL	CLEAR AND SPECIFIC
"In circle time be nice or take time out."	"In circle time keep your hands and feet to yourself."
"You can behave better than that!"	"At the table, use your spoon to eat and keep your chair legs on the floor."
"Straighten up and act like you're supposed to in free play."	"Use your inside voice and your walking feet during free play."

2. BE SIMPLE, BRIEF AND TO THE POINT

Decide if you are giving an explanation or setting a limit. When you are setting a limit, make sure the limit is stated as briefly and simply as possible. When explanations are too long-winded, young children often become confused and stop listening. Also, it is easier for children to remember limits which are stated with fewer words:

EXAMPLES:

LONG-WINDED AND COMPLEX	SIMPLE AND BRIEF
"I can't let you hit Bobby even you are angry. Hitting is impolite and someone might get hurt. You wouldn't want to hurt anyone, I know. And, you don't like it when people hurt you."	"Hitting is not allowed. When you're angry, you can tell Bobby, "It makes me mad when you take my toy."
"It's impolite to interrupt. It hurts peoples' feelings when you interrupt and it's hard to hear. We've talked about our interrrupting rule lots of times."	"One person talks at a time during circle time."

3. STATE DIRECTIONS POSITIVELY

Children are likely to follow suggestions that you give them. If you say, "Don't run around the room," you may be inadvertently giving them the idea of running around the room. On the other hand, saying "Please walk inside the room," plants another, more positive suggestion. *Positive directions also set a friendlier tone, increase a child's desire to cooperate, and give him/her guidelines for meeting your expectations.* Teachers often find this is a valuable tip in encouraging positive behavior.

Some teachers find it helpful to post a list in their class of their most common "Don't" statements with an alternative statement beside it, such as those ilustrated below. If you do use a statement beginning with "Don't," add the positive statement at the end.

EXAMPLES:

NEGATIVE	POSITIVE
"Don't leave crayons on the table."	"All crayons belong in the container as soon as you're finished with them."
"Don't spill your food all over the table."	"Keep your food on your plate."
"Don't paint on the wall,"	"Paint belongs on the paper."
"Don't scream inside."	"Use your quiet voice inside."
"Stop running."	"Walk inside, run outside."

4. USE HARD-LINE PHRASES SELECTIVELY

Save hard-line phrases for those situations in which a strong statement is needed. If you use hard-line phrases too frequently, children will not take you seriously. *The appropriate time to use hard-line phrases is in serious circumstances when the child's action is is dangerous or destructive.* In such situations, phrases such as "I can't let you," "Stop," "No," or "That is not allowed," communicate a protective attitude and help children control their impulses. Although children may not always show it, they are frequently relieved when you provide external control at appropriate times. *Using hard-line words sparingly makes you more effective when you need to use them.*

EXAMPLES:

SELECTIVE USE OF HARD-LINE PHRASES

"I can't let you leave the building without a teacher."

"Kicking *is not allowed."*

"Stop hitting Billy."

"No playing in the street."

5. OFFER ALTERNATIVES FOR UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOR

Often when young children are engaging in inappropriate behavior and have to stop, they are unable to figure out what to do instead. *Children need help finding acceptable outlets for the feelings which are causing them to act inappropriately.* If it is an object being misused, pointing out the actual function of the object can redirect behavior by helping the child use the object apropriately. Therefore, when you have to stop a child's behavior, try to build a suggestion for an acceptable alternative into your limit.

EXAMPLES:

NO ALTERNATIVE	ALTERNATIVE PROVIDED
"I can't let you throw the puzzle pieces."	"I can't let you throw the puzzle pieces. If you are angry, you can use words to tell me about it."

Offer Alternatives For Unacceptable Behavior (Continued)

"Throwing sand is not allowed."	"Throwing sand is not allowed. If you need to throw, you can throw the ball."
"Stop tearing the book."	"Books are for reading. You can tear the old newspapers in the art center."

6. REPLACE THREATS WITH CLEAR EXPECTATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

Threats create an atmosphere of fear and resentment. Also they don't provide clear guidelines for behavior. Often we make threats when we are irritated or frustrated and then we don't follow through. This damages our credibility. Clear expectations and consequences assure that children know how to behave in situations and help them develop a sense of responsibility for their behavior.

EXAMPLES:

THREAT	CLEAR EXPECTATIONS
"If you throw that mudpie, you'll be sorry!"	"Put the mudpie down or you'll need to leave the mud area for today."
"If you do that one more time we'll lose PE time."	"When everyone is in line we can go outside."
If you don't do what I say you're going to get it!"	"It's time to come inside. You can walk or I can carry you."
"If you two fight, you're going to get in trouble."	"Jamie and Bobby, you both need to put the sticks down and play separately or take a time-out."

7. ELIMINATE QUESTIONS YOU REALLY DON'T MEAN TO ASK

Only ask questions when you expect an answer or can accept whatever choice the child makes. *If you are giving a direction or making a request, use a clear statement rather than a question or plea.*

EXAMPLES:

UNCLEAR QUESTION	CLEAR STATEMENTS OR REQUESTS
"Will you put your coat on?"	"It's time to put your coat on before we go outside."
"Will you come to group time?"	"You need to find your space in the circle."
"Do you want to help me clean?"	"It's clean up time. It's time to put the blocks away."
"Do you know where your contract is?"	"Contracts are kept in the box by my desk. Please get yours."

8. AVOID LABELING

Labels such as "you're a baby" or "you're mean" are belittling to children and are damaging to their self esteem. *Change labels to specific descriptions of desired behavior.* Also avoid using labels when talking about children to adults or other children.

EXAMPLES:

LABELING	SPECIFIC DESCRIPTION
"Act like a kindergartener. Only babies can't stand in line."	"We need to stand in line on the way to the computer room."
"Only messy children don't use the waste basket."	"Put your trash in the waste basket when you finish snack."
Said to aide in front of Johnny - "You know Johnny is immature and needs your help with his puzzle."	"Johnny is working on his puzzle and needs your help."

9. AVOID AMBIVALENT WORDS

Ambivalent words like "maybe" and "sometimes" give children the message that you are unsure about what you want them to do. For many children such phrasing can be an invitation to test your limit. *Therefore, avoid ambivalent words; use firm, specific statements which communicate certainty about your expectations.*

EXAMPLES:

AMBIVALENT	FIRM AND SPECIFIC
"Maybe you should pick up the dress-up clothes."	"The dress-up clothes need to be picked up before you play with other toys."
"Sometime this morning it would be nice if you'd wash your hands."	"You will need to wash your hands as soon as you finish painting."
"It would be nice if you went to music today."	"It's time to go to the music room."

10. REPLACE AUTHORITARIAN WORDS

Authoritarian words such as *"you must," "you should," "you have to," "you ought to,"* are frequently seen as orders rather than requests. Such words can make children feel that they are being forced to do something. When they feel this way, children will often rebel, act stubborn or pretend not to hear. *Change authoritarian words into statements that are factual and objective.* When expectations are presented in an objective and factual way, children are more likely to cooperate with your request.

EXAMPLES:

AUTHORITARIAN	FIRM AND SPECIFIC
"You have to put the bike up now!"	"The bike belongs in the shed."
"You should stop bouncing that ball inside."	"Balls are for bouncing outside."
"Stop messing with those coats!"	"Coats belong on the coat rack."

11. OFFER CHOICES

Offering children choices allows them to make decisions and take responsibility for their own behavior. When you are offering a choice rather than making a demand, children feel a sense of participation and are more likely to cooperate. Choices not only help children develop their own preferences and individuality, they can be useful in limit setting. There are many occasions when you can have children choose between two alternative permissable behaviors. You can also use choices to help children get started on activities they are not motivated to do. When there is no choice about doing a certain activity, you might be able to provide choices about parts of the activity, the sequence of the activity, or how the activity is done. Using choices in this way can often prevent balking or stalling. Before offering a choice remember to carefully figure out what options are acceptable to you and be prepared to go along with whatever alternative is chosen.

EXAMPLES:

COMMAND	CHOICE
"You must work at the game center."	"Would you like to work at the game center on a puzzle or with the pegboard?"
"Stop hitting."*	"You need to sit with your hands to yourself during circle time or leave the group."
"Get that gum out of your mouth."	"You can put the gum in some paper and give it to me or throw it in the trash."
"Clean up all that finger paint, now."	"It's time to clean up the finger paint. Do you want to wash the table or your arms first?"

12. USE EXTERNAL REFERENCES FOR SETTING LIMITS.

Using external references (e.g., a clock, a signal, or an activity, in place of personal statements such as, "I need you to," "We need to," "You have to") can help children accept a limit without resisting. It's much harder for children to have a power struggle with an object or a concept than with you.

*It is important to save hard-line phrases for serious situations.

EXAMPLES:

PERSONALLY STATED	EXTERNAL REFERENCE
"You must stay on your cot until naptime is over."	"When the big hand is on the 3, naptime is over."
"I will tell you when it's snack time."	"When the lights blink, it will be time for snack."
"I want you to clean up now."	"After all the centers are cleaned, we will be able to go outside."

THE TIMING OF LIMIT SETTING - LET TIME WORK FOR YOU

1. ESTABLISH ROUTINES AND POINT OUT THE SEQUENCE OF ACTIVITIES

Routines can help to make a child's world safe and orderly. Routines help children learn to work independently; that is, to accept structure without needing teachers to repeat rules over and over. Most schools have routines and schedules. It is helpful for adults to be explicit about routines with children, even to write them down with both pictures and words. Warn children ahead of time about changes in routine and remind them about the proper sequence of activities.

EXAMPLES:

ROUTINES

Sample Schedule:

8:30 - 9:30	Free Play
9:30 - 10:00	Group Time
10:00 - 10:45	Outside Play
10:45 - 11:00	Snack
11:00 - 11:45	Center Time
11:45 - 12:00	Clean up and good-by

Reminders about sequence:
"First, we will have free play, and then we will have our music time."
"First, we will have group time, then we will go outside."
"First, I will read the story, then it will be your turn to talk."

2. GIVE PREPARATION FOR CHANGES AND ALLOW TIME FOR TRANSITION

Young children often have a hard time changing from one activity to another. Preparing them for change can help them organize themselves.

EXAMPLES:

PREPARING FOR CHANGES

"We need to leave in 5 minutes. Finish up with your game."

"You can slide 3 more times and then we need to go inside."

Young children find transition activities especially helpful.

EXAMPLES:

TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

Use a signal such as blinking the lights or singing a special song as a sign that you need the children to stop and listen.

Use a finger game or special song to start off group time and help the children settle in their chairs.

Make games to help children get in line or go from one place to another. (e.g., "Go get in line if you are wearing red.")

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3. RECOGNIZE THAT IT CAN BE HARD FOR CHILDREN TO STOP

Children often have a hard time when they have to stop an activity in which they are involved. When there is no time left for them to complete, or even begin, an activity they are eager to do, children will show a lot of resistance toward moving on to the next period in the schedule. In order to help prevent or minimize these difficulties, it is helpful to offer children a time in the future when they can get back to the activity.

EXAMPLES:

RECOGNIZING THAT IT'S HARD TO STOP

"It's starting to rain. I know you are disappointed but we will have to leave the sand box. If the rain has stopped this afternoon, we can play in the sand again."

Recognize That It Can Be Hard For Children To Stop (Continued)

"We need to put this book up for today. We can finish it tomorrow during storytime."

"It's clean-up time and I know you haven't had a chance to play with blocks today. You can have the first turn in the block area tomorrow."

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4. PREPARE CHILDREN FOR NEW SITUATIONS

Set the stage for new situations by letting children know ahead of time what will happen and exactly how you expect them to behave. This can prevent behavior problems from occurring.

EXAMPLES:

PREPARING FOR NEW SITUATIONS

"When we get to the museum, there will be lots of interesting things to see. We will have time to look at all of them. You need to stay with me so we can go to one area at a time. We will also have to use our quiet voices inside the building. That's the museum rule."

"In a few minutes the policeman will be here to visit us. He will talk to us first, then show us a movie and then answer our questions. While he is here we need to use our listening ears. During question time we need to raise our hands if we have a question."

CONCLUSION

Try one tip at a time. Children (and adults) can get overwhelmed if too much in their environment changes too fast. After one new technique, rule, or routine works for while and feels comfortable to you, try another. Changing behavior can be hard work for us as well as the children we teach.

Remember there are no "magic" answers to discipline problems. We hope these tips will be helpful to you. Good luck!

This booklet is one of a continuing series of booklets of interest to parents and teachers of young children. Please write Project Enlightenment for a list of topics in this series or for information about other Project publications.

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